# Dreams Serendipity & Creativity

Dr George John

## Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios

Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios (1922-1996), renowned scholar, humanist thinker, reputed philosopher-theologian, speaker and polyglot, sought to bring together and correlate insights from several disciplines like philosophy, physics, economics, political science, medicine, education, and theology. Born on 9th August, 1922, at Tripunithura, Kerala, the brilliant scholar-bishop had his earlier stints in his home state as a journalist and postal service employee. He proceeded to Ethiopia in 1947, accepting the job of a teacher there and, in the course of time, became the Special Secretary for Education and Advisor on Indian affairs to Emperor Haile Selassie.

He had an exceptional educational career at Yale, Princeton and Oxford Universities. Returning to Kerala, he was ordained as a priest of the Malankara Orthodox Church. He was invited to be Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in 1961. Returning from Geneva, Fr. Paul Verghese became the Principal of the Orthodox Theological Seminary in 1967. Elevated as a Bishop in 1975, Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios took charge of the Delhi Diocese of the Orthodox Church in July 1975. Honours came unsought to Mar Gregorios. He became President of the World Council of Churches and the Indian Philosophical Congress. In 1988, he received the Soviet Land Nehru Award. He travelled widely and showed an unusual intellectual courage to challenge the overarching Western paradigm and explored alternate ways of thinking, taking his cue from both eastern Christian patristic tradition and Asian philosophical/spiritual tradition. Visiting Professor in several universities, including the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the Delhi University, his critical analysis of the European Enlightenment and its assumptions, and his exposition of the Asian intellectual legacy, provided a platform to review the concepts of the secular and the religious. His proposal for a new Indian/ Asian enlightenment derived its inspiration mainly from the Buddhist tradition that brought together the Rational and the Transcendent dimension.

Mar Gregorios has authored more than 50 books. *The Joy of Freedom, Freedom of Man, The Cosmic Man, The Human Presence, Enlightenment East and West, A Light Too Bright* and the spiritual autobiography *Love's Freedom: The Grand Mystery* are some of the most remarkable among these. Hundreds of his articles and lectures have been published in leading newspapers and international magazines.

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# Abstract

This paper explores the intimate weave between dreams, serendipity, and creativity. I argue that creativity often emerges where three currents meet: the brain's nocturnal recombinatory work in dreaming; a cultivated posture of receptivity to surprise (serendipity); and disciplined craft that can recognise, refine, and realise nascent insights. Drawing on psychology, neuroscience, philosophy of science, and historical case studies—from Kekulé's benzene ring and Loewi's 'vagusstoff' to Mary Shelley's "waking dream," Ramanujan's notebooks, and contemporary studies of sleep—we outline how night-mind and chance encounters seed invention. We then propose a practical, research-informed framework for scholars, clinicians, and creators to nurture fruitful serendipity: practices for dream-capture and incubation, rhythms that alternate focus and mind-wandering, environments that welcome anomaly, and ethical horizons that orient imagination to human flourishing. The paper concludes by situating these themes within a Gandhian inflexion—the responsibility to align imagination with truth-seeking, simplicity, and service—offered here in honour of the Dr. Paulos Gregorios Chair at the School of Gandhian Thought, Mahatma Gandhi University.



**Keywords:** dreams; REM; serendipity; creativity; insight; incubation; default mode network; Gandhian ethics; psychology of science.

## Why this triad, and why now?

"Chance favours the prepared mind," Louis Pasteur famously remarked—a sentence that, in a single breath, holds together accident, attention, and apprenticeship. Replace "chance" with serendipity and "prepared mind" with disciplined imagination, and we have the thesis of this paper. Dreams, serendipity, and creativity are not three curiosities that sometimes coincide; they are, more often than we acknowledge, three facets of the same human capacity: to recombine experience into meaning.

Three contemporary currents make this triad urgent. First, a renaissance of sleep science is revealing how nighttime neural dynamics stabilise memory, extract gist, and explore unusual associations that daylight logic may never attempt. Secondly, in an age of information overload and algorithmic narrowing, cultivating serendipity—those valued, beneficial surprises we did not know to seek—becomes a counter-discipline against tunnel vision. Thirdly, creativity is increasingly recognised not as a mystique reserved for artists, but as a general problem-solving competence central to science, policy, clinical work, and humane technology. To study how dreams feed serendipity and how both feed creativity is, therefore, to study a civic virtue.

This essay proceeds in three movements: Part I describes what dreams do for cognition; Part II clarifies what serendipity is and how it can be cultivated; Part III integrates both within contemporary models of creativity and offers a pragmatic toolkit for scholars and students. Throughout, I retrieve illustrative episodes from the history of ideas—celebrated and quiet, Western and Indian—while keeping an eye on ethical horizons appropriate to a Gandhian university.

## What dreams do

### The architecture of sleep and the gifts of REM

Sleep is not a vacuum in which the brain idles; it is a choreography of stages, broadly divided into non-REM (N1–N3) and REM sleep. Across a typical night, cycles of ~90 minutes alternate between these stages, each contributing to distinct cognitive functions. Non-REM,

especially slow-wave sleep (N3), tends to stabilise and integrate new declarative memories. REM, with its vivid dream mentation, heightened limbic activation, and reduced noradrenergic tone, appears optimised for associative processing, emotional recalibration, and creative recombination.

Two broad conclusions from contemporary research are widely accepted. First, sleep consolidates memory: experiences are replayed and re-weighted, strengthening what matters and pruning what does not. Secondly, REM dreaming is particularly hospitable to remote associations—to putting together elements that rarely co-occur during wakefulness—yielding the "strange but fitting" juxtapositions that often give creative work its spark. Dream reports themselves read like hypotheses: they test how far we can stretch a pattern before it breaks.

## Dreaming as recombination and simulation

From Freud's early emphasis on disguised wish-fulfilment to Jung's symbolic individuation, psychoanalytic traditions treated dreams as meaningful narratives. Later neurocognitive theories—such as activation-synthesis accounts—insisted that the cortex is improvising upon internally generated noise. A synthesis has quietly emerged: dreams are indeed improvisations, but not mere noise; they are recombinatory simulations that explore the "adjacent possible." Revonsuo's threat-simulation theory added an evolutionary edge: by rehearsing danger scenarios, dream consciousness may have conferred adaptive value. Contemporary work on predictive processing frames dreams as "generative models running off-line": they stress-test our priors, try improbable fits, and, sometimes, discover a better one.

The point of creativity is straightforward. Dreaming loosens the tyranny of the immediately probable. With sensory gates partially closed and executive veto weakened, associative networks can traverse longer paths, multiplying the chance that two remote memory nodes will "find" each other. That is the raw material of novelty.

## Hypnagogia and the first fringe of sleep

Between waking and sleep lies a liminal corridor—hypnagogia (at sleep onset) and hypnopompia (on waking). Reports from artists and scientists abound: Thomas Edison is said to have napped with metal balls in hand so that, as he slipped into N1 sleep and the balls fell, he would wake and capture the half-formed image; Salvador Dalí riffed on similar tactics. Recent laboratory studies support the intuition: spending even a short time in N1 can increase the chance of discovering hidden rules in problem-solving tasks, provided one is prompted to report and refine upon waking. The implication is not that magic happens in N1; rather, that the liminal state is fertile because it balances loosened association with residual lucidity—ideation without overbearing self-critique.

## Emotion, insight, and the calm of REM

REM's neurochemistry—especially low noradrenaline—may allow the brain to revisit emotional material with lower autonomic arousal, stripping fear from memory while preserving content. Clinically, this reframing helps us understand both the function and the disturbance of dreams: nightmares may be failed attempts at such reconsolidation. For creativity, the same physiology may aid insight by "cooling" a problem long enough for new angles to appear without the panic of stuckness. We all know the colloquial counsel: "sleep on it." It endures because it works.

## What serendipity is (and is not)

### Etymology and structure

The word serendipity was coined by Horace Walpole (1754) after a Persian tale, The Three Princes of Serendip, whose heroes "were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of." The phrase "accidents and sagacity" names the core structure: there must be (i) an unexpected encounter and (ii) a prepared capacity to notice, value, and interpret it. Mere accident is not serendipity; nor is blind luck. Serendipity is patterned luck plus a mind ready to cooperate.

Sociologist Robert K. Merton later described "serendipity patterns" in science: the unexpected datum that destabilises an old frame and invites a better theory; the anomaly that refuses to be ignored; the instrument error that reveals a new phenomenon. This pattern is not confined to laboratories; it is a general feature of learning in complex environments.

### Case studies: From contamination to consecration

The cupboards of discovery are full of "happy accidents" that were only happy because someone was paying attention.

- **Kekulé and the benzene ring.** August Kekulé famously dreamed of a snake seizing its tail and woke with a cyclic model for benzene. Whether strictly dream or hypnagogic reverie, the point stands: the image was not ex nihilo; it was the shape that fit years of chemical puzzling.

- **Otto Loewi's vagus experiment.** Loewi reportedly dreamed of the experiment that proved chemical neurotransmission—transferring fluid from a stimulated frog's vagus-innervated heart to another and observing the slowing effect. He executed the dream plan the next morning. Serendipity here was not a gift instead of rigour, but a gift to rigour.

- **Mary Shelley's "waking dream."** In the cold summer of 1816, Shelley wrote of a "waking dream" that furnished the core image of Frankenstein. The image did not write the book; it catalysed it. Serendipity offered a seed; craft grew the tree.

- **Srinivasa Ramanujan.** The Indian mathematician attributed some results to dream-visions, which does not diminish their mathematical content but reminds us that intuition often arrives as imagery or felt necessity before proof. Serendipity is not anti-reason; it is pre-proof.

- **Penicillin and beyond.** Fleming noticed a contaminating mould that lysed bacteria—an anomaly noticed, valued, and pursued. The same could be said of X-rays, microwave ovens, Post-it notes—the lore matters less than the lesson: keep a place for surprises on your bench and in your mind.

## The ecology of serendipity

Serendipity is not only a mental trait; it is an ecology. Certain environments—intellectual, social, architectural—raise the base rate of fruitful surprise. Libraries with accidental adjacencies, interdisciplinary corridors, laboratories with shared coffee spaces, seminars that welcome dissent, museums that juxtapose periods, cities with walkable streets: these are serendipity engines. In our digital era, algorithmic curation tends to reduce variance and intensify echo-chambers. We therefore must design serendipity back in: purposeful exposure to unfamiliar domains, deliberate sampling outside comfort zones, and pedagogies that reward anomaly-seeking.

## Preparedness: the craft behind chance

Pasteur's aphorism enters again. Preparedness is knowledge plus habit. It is familiarity with a field's grammar, coupled with the humility to suspect that the field's current dictionary may be missing words. Preparedness is also keeping records—laboratory notebooks, dream journals, sketchbooks—because serendipity has a half-life: unrecorded, it evaporates. Finally, preparedness is ethical: to be oriented by good ends so that when accidents present options, we choose those that heal rather than harm.

## How creativity happens

### The four stages—updated

Graham Wallas's classic four-stage model—preparation, incubation, illumination, verification—still holds explanatory power, especially when coupled with contemporary cognitive neuroscience. Preparation loads the mind with relevant material; incubation allows unconscious and preconscious processes to recombine elements without executive micromanagement; illumination is the "Aha!" (often misdescribed as instantaneous, though it is the felt threshold of something long-brewed); verification is where ideas are tested and iterated into usefulness.

Dreams naturally belong to incubation and sometimes to illumination. Serendipity is the ecosystem in which incubation meets an external trigger—anomalous datum, stray conversation, misread

footnote—and illumination occurs. Verification is where rigorous method earns their keep.

### Networks in dialogue: Default and control

Neuroscientific accounts increasingly describe creativity as a dance between the brain's default mode network (DMN)—involved in memory, simulation, mind-wandering—and the executive control network (ECN)—involved in planning, constraint, and evaluation. Creative performance requires not the dominance of one but the coupling of both: the DMN proposes, the ECN disposes; the DMN ranges widely, the ECN shapes. Sleep biases towards DMN-like activity; wakefulness brings ECN authority. Effective practice across days and nights lets both do their part.

### Divergent and convergent thinking

J. P. Guilford distinguished divergent thinking (generating multiple possibilities) from convergent thinking (selecting and refining). Creativity requires both. Dreams and serendipitous encounters are abundant in divergence; scholarship and engineering demand convergence. Education that privileges only one impoverishes the other. The ideal seminar teaches students to generate wild hypotheses and to prune with evidence and method.

### Flow: the subjective signature

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described "flow"—a state of deep absorption where challenge and skill match, self-consciousness recedes, and time dilates. Flow is not identical with creativity, but it often accompanies sustained creative work. Interestingly, flow can be cultivated by constraints: structured routines, clear goals, and immediate feedback. Dreams are boundaryless; flow is bounded. Creativity needs both the ocean of nights and the riverbanks of days.

### Where the threads meet: dreams as an engine of serendipity

Let us bring the strands together and ask directly:

**How do dreams feed serendipity, and how do both feed creativity?**

1. **Recombination under lowered inhibition.** Dreaming relaxes the prefrontal veto, allowing remote associations to meet. Many will be useless; some will be gold. The person who journals dreams is building a library of odd combinations that may later prove apt.

2. **Incubation across states.** Preparation loads the problem; sleep "works" it. Hypnagogia sits in the doorway where a problem can be seen anew. Morning pages, walks, showers—these wakeful liminals serve a similar role.

3. **Surprise as a signal.** Serendipity sharpens the sense that surprise may be useful. A surprising dream image, a surprising result, a surprising sentence in a book—we train ourselves to ask, "What if this is the edge of a pattern?"

4. **Craft as a filter.** Without craft, recombination yields cacophony. Craft tests, tunes, and translates dreamt images and accidental findings into shareable forms—equations, arguments, designs, therapies.

5. **Ethics as orientation.** Serendipity can tempt us into novelty for novelty's sake. A Gandhian lens asks: Does this creative move simplify, steward, and serve? Does it honour satya (truth) and ahimsa (non-harm)? Ethics focuses the searchlight of attention.

## Brief portraits from the borderlands of night and insight

These vignettes are not hagiographies but patterns.

• **Elias Howe and the sewing needle.** Struggling to perfect a lockstitch machine, Howe reportedly dreamt of being threatened by warriors with spears that had holes near their tips—suggesting the needle's eye should be near the point. Whether mythologised or not, the design solved a stubborn constraint.

• **Paul McCartney's "Yesterday."** McCartney has said the melody arrived in a dream. For weeks, he asked others whether it was a memory of an old tune. Only after verification did the dream-gift become a song.

• **Henri Poincaré.** The mathematician described a sudden insight while stepping onto a bus after days of fruitless work—the classic incubation narrative. It is not irrelevant that he walked, rather than forced himself to keep staring at the same page.

• **Abdul Kalam and the thews of aspiration.** The former President of India often spoke to students about dreams "that do not let you sleep." Whatever the rhetorical exaggeration, the counsel is apt: the right kind of dream is a responsibility we wake to.

• **Clinical hunches and research programmes.** Ask any experienced clinician about a diagnostic breakthrough; you will hear stories of pattern recognition that "clicked" while half-attending to something else, later confirmed by tests. Good medicine, like good science, keeps a place for surprise in the file.

These portraits push against a false dichotomy: either rational method or romantic dreams. The paradox of creativity is that it asks for both lucid play and rigorous proof.

## Practical frameworks: cultivating fruitful serendipity

The School of Behavioural Sciences is full of working scholars and students. What, concretely, can we do—this week—to increase the chance that dreams and serendipity will help our work? Below is a twelve-point, research-informed, classroom-ready toolkit.

1. **Protect sleep as research time.** Treat 7–8 hours not as a luxury but as a lab in which your brain works for you. Regular sleep–wake timing appears as important as duration. If you must choose, choose regularity.

2. **Keep a dream and idea journal by the bed.** Capture fragments immediately upon waking—images, phrases, feelings, puzzles. Date them. A week later, look for patterns. Many entries will be trivial; some will be clarifying; a few will be catalytic.

3. **Use hypnagogic probes.** If an impasse persists, try the Edison-Dalí trick safely: recline with a small object in hand, or set a soft timer for 10–15 minutes, and invite your mind to hover on the problem as sleep nudges in. When you wake, write before you evaluate.

4. **Alternate modes deliberately.** Work in cycles: focused effort (45–60 minutes), then a mind-wandering recess (a walk, a cup of tea, a few lines of unrelated poetry). Incubation is not idleness; it is phase-appropriate labour.

5. **Design for anomaly.** In reading, include one journal outside your field. In conversation, schedule cross-disciplinary lunches. In the lab, keep a whiteboard column titled "Odd." In supervision, ask your students weekly: "What surprised you?"

6. **Practise generous attention.** Many serendipities are interpersonal: a stray remark at a seminar, a question from a junior colleague, a student's naive analogy. We miss them when we are hurried or defensive. Slow down enough to receive.

7. **Build simple rituals.** Morning pages; end-of-day "three questions" (What puzzled me? What delighted me? Where did I feel resistance?); Sunday walks without headphones; a weekly "idea hour" without email. Rituals are serendipity scaffolds.

8. **Embrace small experiments.** When an unexpected idea arrives, give it a tiny test. Sketch the argument. Run a quick simulation. Draft the abstract. The motto: "Make it small and soon." Serendipities die when postponed indefinitely.

9. **Teach anomaly-seeking.** In methods courses, make room for "error stories." Invite a panel of researchers to narrate how mistakes helped them. Assess students not only on correct answers but on the quality of questions.

10. **Mind your metrics.** Environments obsessed with narrow productivity metrics squeeze out wonder. Within constraints, defend small plots of land where play is permitted. Many breakthroughs arrive when no one is counting.

11. **Ethical orientation.** Add a reflective prompt to project proposals: If this goes right, who benefits? Who might be harmed? Serendipity without ethics can be cleverness without wisdom.

12. **Community and gratitude.** Serendipity flourishes in trust. Build collegial networks that celebrate others' wins and share credit. Gratitude keeps attention wide and defensiveness low—the ecological conditions under which surprise can be received.

## Dreams, culture, and the plural grammar of imagination

No discussion of dreams in India can ignore the cultural breadth of oneiric traditions—Upanishadic reflections on waking, dreaming (svapna), deep sleep (su?upti), and the witnessing consciousness (turiya); Buddhist mindfulness of dream-like impermanence; Sufi ru'ya as truthful dream; and Christian mystic visions that mingle sleep and prayer. One need not collapse these diverse grammars into a single theory to learn from them. They converge on three insights relevant to creativity:

1. **Dreams require interpretation.** They are not direct oracles; they are invitations to discernment. The interpretive community—teachers, peers, wise elders—matters as a check against self-deception.

2. **Imagination is morally formed.** What we habitually attend to shapes what appears in dreams and what we select from them. Vices like envy and vanity distort imagination; virtues like humility and compassion cleanse perception.

3. **Simplicity clarifies.** Traditions of austerity and simplicity—resonant with Gandhian ethics—do not suppress creativity; they can heighten it by removing noise. Many creators discover that reducing inputs for a season (fewer apps, fewer obligations, fewer rival aims) enables deeper synthesis.

## A Gandhian coda: truth, non-harm, and the uses of imagination

Why invoke Gandhi in a paper on dreams and serendipity? Because imagination, untethered, can be as dangerous as it is dazzling. Gandhian thought offers three orienting commitments.

- **Satya (truth).** Creativity must be accountable to truth. In science, this means method and falsifiability; in the humanities, this means honesty about sources, arguments that fairly represent opponents, and a refusal to manipulate emotions dishonestly.
- **Ahimsa (non-harm).** New ideas often have downstream effects. A serendipitous insight in technology or policy is not innocent by default; it must be judged by its consequences for the vulnerable. Non-harm is a boundary that protects imagination from hubris.
- **Simplicity and service.** The worth of a creative act is partly measured by whether it serves the common good. In a university named after Gandhi, the imagination ought to be a servant of justice, not merely a producer of novelty.

In bringing dreams and serendipity into the classroom, we are therefore not merely optimising for output; we are shaping a moral imagination that seeks to heal.

## Common misunderstandings—and gentle corrections

It is useful to address a few popular myths.

1. **"Dreams cause creativity."** Dreams supply material and sometimes catalyse insight, but they do not replace the work. Creativity is recombination plus refinement. Without verification, dreams remain dreams.

2. **"Serendipity is luck; you either have it or you don't."** Serendipity's events are fortuitous; the capacity to recognise and use them is trainable. Habits, environments, and communities can raise your serendipity quotient.

3. **"Only artists benefit from this."** Scientists, clinicians, engineers, and administrators all profit from incubation, anomaly-seeking, and creative verification. The ventilator improved, the traffic system redesigned, the therapy adapted—these too are creative acts.

4. **"If it didn't come hard, it isn't valuable."** Many disciplines tacitly valorise struggle. Discipline is crucial, but ease does not disqualify. If a dream or accidental observation yields a solution, let gratitude—not guilt—be your response.

## Towards a pedagogy of the unexpected

How might a School of Behavioural Sciences embed these principles in its teaching and research culture? Three proposals:

- **A required first-year module on "The Practices of Insight."** Blend sleep science, attention training, journaling, and anomaly-friendly method. Assess students through a portfolio that documents preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification across a project of their choice.

- **A cross-chair "Serendipity Colloquium."** Monthly gatherings where faculty and students present "error stories" and "happy accidents"—the wrong agar plate, the mis-labelled transcript, the offhand remark that solved a problem. Celebrate disciplined receptivity.

- **A "Liminal Lab."** A quiet, device-light room for napping, meditation, and short hypnagogic probes, paired with whiteboards and notebooks. A place where the day can meet the night without shame.

These are small institutional choices with disproportionate pay-offs: they build an ecology in which dreams and serendipity can do their work.

## Conclusion: the courage to welcome what we did not plan

The poet Rilke counselled a young artist to "live the questions." To welcome dreams is to live the questions the night asks of us; to cultivate serendipity is to live the questions the world asks of us; to

commit to creativity is to honour those questions with careful answers. The through-line is courage—the courage to loosen control without abandoning responsibility, to play without ceasing to prove, to let surprise become service.

As you read this paper (and, in due course, as I deliver its lecture), I invite you to a gentle experiment over the coming fortnight. Protect your sleep. Keep a bedside notebook. When puzzled by a problem, walk without your phone. Talk with someone outside your field. Catalogue the odd. And when the unexpected arrives—at 3 a.m. on a scrap of dream, or at noon in a corridor conversation—treat it with hospitality: "Stay a while; let's see what you might become." If even one in ten such guests proves itself, you will have changed your scholarship. If one in a hundred serves the public good, you will have honoured this university's name.

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**Note:** The historical anecdotes included are widely cited in scholarship and biography. Specific details sometimes vary across tellings; their use here is illustrative of recurrent patterns at the nexus of dreaming, serendipity, and creative verification.

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## Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios Chair

The Chair was originally established in 1998 at the University, and the first incumbent was the renowned theoretical physicist Dr E.C.G. Sudarshan. While reorganising the *Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios Chair* recently, Mahatma Gandhi University appointed Prof Dr. (Rev) K. M. George as the new incumbent Chair Professor.

**Dr George John** is a retired Consultant Psychiatrist, graduated from Kasturba Medical College, Manipal and the Universities of Nottingham & London, with training at St Thomas's, London and the Institute of Psychiatry/ Maudsley. Appointed NHS Consultant in 1980, he served in the British NHS and later became Founding Medical Director of Cygnet Hospital Godden Green, Sevenoaks; he subsequently chaired George John & Associates LLP and was Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist at St Luke's Hospital, London, for the clergy. He holds the Freedom of the City of London and a personal coat of arms; in the early 2000s, he was presented to HM Queen Elizabeth II, and in 2024 received private audiences with Pope Francis and the 14th Dalai Lama. Since retirement, he has written on human flourishing, conflict, and the philosophy of psychiatry; two books are forthcoming: *Abraham's Sacrifice* & *Broken and Becoming*. He now lives in Kochi, India, and is a caregiver to his wife.

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